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FOLK POETRY

FOLK POETRY in Iranian languages. The term ‘folk poetry’ can be properly used for texts which have some characteristics marking them as poetry and belong to the tradition of the common people, as against the dominant ‘polite’ literary culture of the area.

Given the breadth of this definition no comprehensive, detailed study of all folk poetry in Iranian languages is possible. All that our present state of knowledge allows is a general survey of characteristic aspects of the most important types and genres of folk poetry in Iranian languages. Little is known about pre-Islamic Iranian folk poetry (for some aspects of Old and Middle Iranian poetry see Benveniste; Henning, 1942; idem, 1950; Boyce; Cejpek, pp. 619-22; Shaked). This article will therefore focus on those modern traditions which have been most fully described, i.e., on Persian, Tajiki, Kurdish, Pashto, and Baluchi folk poetry, with some reference to Ossetic. It is worth noting that folk poetry in Persian has received comparatively little attention from Iranists. It has been said that, while a large proportion of Persian polite literature consists of poetry, most popular literature in that language is in prose (Cejpek, p. 694); however, another reason for the scarcity of our data on the subject is probably to be sought in most Persianists’ predominant preoccupation with polite literature.

The above definition raises certain problems. In some cases (e.g., in Tajikistan, see Rahmoni; van den Berg; Bečka; Cejpek) poems which are held to have originated in the classical Persian tradition and are attributed to well-known classical poets, have been handed down as part of popular culture for so long

that they can now legitimately be regarded as folk poetry. It is debatable, on the other hand, whether certain genres of poetry which are not part of a dominant polite literature but cannot be said to belong to the tradition of the common people, should be classified as folk poetry. The sacred poetry of the Kurdish Yazidis and Ahl-e Ḥaqq (q.v.), for example, is the preserve of a special class of transmitters, and is not widely understood by the general public. As far as form is concerned, however, these traditions clearly form part of Kurdish oral literature, and in other regions similar genres can undoubtedly be qualified as folk poetry. The two genres in question will therefore be taken into account in this survey.

Some characteristic features. Traditionally, writing did not play a prominent role in the transmission of folk poetry, which therefore tends to have the fluidity and flexibility that seems characteristic of oral literature. Some types of folk poetry allow for a considerable amount of extemporising (e.g., Kurdish songs of mourning, see Allison, 1996; on the Tajik *baytmoni* see Rahmoni); however, essential features of such improvisations still tend to be determined by the genre. Some composers perform their own original compositions. Elsewhere poems whose authorship is known and recognised is performed by professionals who are not composers (see Dames, pp. xvi-xvii). In yet other traditions it is not unusual for performers to claim authorship of songs which were in fact composed by others (see Darmesteter, I, p. cxciiii). In most cases, however, the singer or performer of a text neither is nor claims to be its composer. Anonymity, in fact, is sometimes held to be a characteristic of folk poetry, which is not true in all cases (see above; folk poems deriving from classical Persian poetryare generally attributed to a named poet, see van den Berg, pp. 106-13).

It is often claimed or assumed that the transmitter reproduces the text exactly as he has learned it (though in practice variations still tend to occur in such traditions); in other cases a certain flexibility of transmission is acknowledged to exist, and the status of the transmitter may depend on his individual performance of a traditional text. In either case the essential elements of the text in question are usually well known to the audience before the performance.

Classification of oral poetry. While it is clear that each of the literatures concerned include a number of different “genres” determined by form and/or content, a precise definition of these poses certain problems. Local terminology and categories may differ from those a Western researcher is

used to. The local population may not use explicit categories, or use an unexpectedly large number without providing clear information as to definitions and distinctions. Furthermore, local terms may vary from place to place, and it cannot be assumed that a term known from classical Persian poetry has the same meaning when used in the context of a local folk genre. The word *bayt* (q.v.), for example, is used for a distich or verse in a range of Iranophone cultures (see, e.g., Rahmoni), but in Yazidi usage it denotes a long religious composition. In Tajikistan *čor-bayti* (*čār-baytī*)is one of several terms for a quatrain (Cejpek, p. 694; Rahmoni); a Pashto *čār-bayta,* on the other hand, may have a far greater number of lines (the genre is also known by various other names,see MacKenzie). In the Iranophone area as a whole the words *robāʿī* and *do-baytī* denote short poems with a fairly wide range of formal characteristics (in Pashto, *robāʿī* is used for the equivalent of the classical Persian *ḡazal*, q.v.; see MacKenzie). Formal criteria which are generally regarded as important by Western researchers may not be perceived as such by Iranophone peoples: the term *dāstān* characteristically denotes a “tale” or “story line”; it may, however, be narrated in prose or verse form, depending on the area (cf. Cejpek, pp. 642-43).

Folk poetry and polite literature. As far as the relations between these types of literature in Iranophone areas are concerned, an important distinction is that between cultures whose polite and popular traditions use the same language (as in parts of Persia, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan), and those where different languages have traditionally been used (Kurdish, Pashto, Baluchi, Pamir languages). In the former case there has generally been considerable influence both ways (cf. Lazard; Cejpek, p. 609; de Bruijn). Folk poems, for example, inspired new forms of Persian literature (see FAHLAVĪYĀT; on the popular origins of the *robāʿī* see Cejpek, pp. 694-95; Rypka, p. 94). Moreover, recitations of classical poetry may form part of popular performances; for instance, passages from the *Šāh-nāma* are recited as part of *naqqālī* performances in Persia (on the *madāh* performances of the Ismaʿilis of Badaḵšān see van den Berg, pp. 309 ff.).

Where the dominant literary language and the language of folk poetry differ, the two traditions are usually more independent; influence of the dominant (Persian, Arabic, or Turkish) tradition on folk poetry can be discerned in some cases, but much less in others. In cultures where folk literature uses a non-dominant language, many works which enjoy great prestige locally exist only in forms that clearly belong to folk poetry. In some cases literary versions of

such texts also exist in the local language: The Kurdish folk epic *Memē Alan*, for example, formed the basis of Aḥmad Ḵānī's famous *Mem ū Zīn* (see Lescot, passim; Chyet, passim). In modern times, forms originating in folk poetry have sometimes been adopted by modern polite literature (for Tajikistan see Cejpek, p. 677).

NARRATIVE FOLK POETRY

Heroic epics. Epic texts, which often combine heroic, historical, legendary, and romantic features, can be narrated in poetry or prose, depending on the local tradition. Many epics consist of one or more cycles (groups of texts centering around a particular hero or event), elements of which can be performed as semi-independent episodes. Reference was already made (see above) to the role of the *Šāh-nāma* in the popular culture of Persia; elements from the *Šāh-nāma* tradition are also preserved in Kurdish folk poetry (Nikitine, 1956, p. 194). Much of traditional Baluchi poetry consists of epic cycles(*daptar*). The oldest of these describes the tribes' advent on the Indian subcontinent (which took place some time between the 8th and 12th century C.E.), and the subsequent conflict between two leading tribes, which was due to rivalry in love between tribal leaders (Dames, pp. xxi-xxii). A group of these texts deals particularly with genealogy (Elfenbein, forthcoming). Unlike the allusive historical poetry of some peoples (see Lyrical folk poetry, below), the narrative style of these Baluchi texts is relatively straightforward, which helps to explain their long popularity. The Ossetic *Nart* cycles, which combine historical and legendary elements and are probably based on an ancient tradition (Dumézil, pp. 11-16; Cejpek, pp. 640-42), are generally narrated in prose. There are some exceptions, however, notably the "Song of Atsæmœz," of which a version in poetry has been recorded. In Tajikistan, epic folk literature around the popular hero Gurūglī plays an important role in folk culture; the epic, which is of Turkic origin, is recounted in verse in parts of the country, and in prose form elsewhere (see Cejpek, pp. 634-39; Rahmoni). The Kurdish epic *Dimdim* (q.v.), the story of a Kurdish leader who, seeking independence, builds his own castle and dies defending it, is based on an historical event that took place in the early 17th century (Allison, 1996, p. 31). Most extant versions, however, have acquired many romantic elements.

Romantic themes. Many "romances" are known in Iranian folk traditions; some are of non-Iranian origin (e.g., the Alexander romance and the love story of Leylī and Majnūn), while others go back to pre-Islamic Iranian traditions (e.g., Vīs o Rāmīn, Šīrīn o Farhād, Ḵosrow o Šīrīn, tales about Rostam, see

Cejpek, pp. 631 f.). Romantic tales in fact have a central place in the narrative folk poetry of Iranian peoples. The Kurdish epic, *Mem ū Zīn* is a tragic love story comparable to Romeo and Juliet; several other romantic tales of love (including Leylī and Majnūn) form part of Kurdish folk poetry. In Pashto such tales are also traditionally told in verse form (see Darmesteter, II, pp. cci, 109-46; Heston, 1986; idem, 1988, pp. 8-9; Grima, pp. 150-54). The popular tale of Šer ʿĀlam and Memunəy, which describes how honor forces a man to kill his beloved wife because her reputation has been tainted by slander, aptly illustrates how such tales can reflect local culture (Grima, loc. cit.). In the Pashto-speaking areas romantic and moralistic tales in verse form (*qeṣṣa*) are widely available in the form of audio cassettes and chapbooks (cf. Grima, p. 150; on Baluchi romantic ballads, including a version of Leylī and Majnūn, see Dames, pp. xxv-xxvi).

Religious themes: Perhaps the most prominent genre of narrative folk poetry of a religious character is formed by the text of the Shiʿite passion plays (*taʿzīa*; see Cejpek, p. 682). Narrative poems describing the Prophet Moḥammad's birth (*mawlūd-nāma*) and his journey to Heaven (*meʿrāj-nāma*) are also important examples of this category, as are verse tales about saints, miracles, creation, and other religious themes (for Baluchi, see Dames, pp. 135-64; for Kurdish, see, e.g., Socin, pp. 166-74; Pashto *qeṣṣa* literature contains several texts of this type). Many Yazidi sacred texts and Ahl-e Ḥaqq *kalām* cycles narrate a sequence of occurrences (e.g., the events of sacred history, or legends) partly by means of allusive verses which assume knowledge of the tradition on the part of the audience (on the former, see Kreyenbroek, 1995a, passim; on the latter, see Ṣafīzāda, passim).

LYRICAL FOLK POETRY

Historical themes. Many texts of a historical nature in Pashto and Kurdish have some narrative features, but are on the whole to be classified as lyrical texts (for Pashto historical ballads see Darmesteter; on Kurdish texts of this typesee Allison, 1996, and idem, forthcoming). These compositions partly serve a purpose similar to that of narrative poetry, i.e., to recall historical events. However, apart from occasional narrative passages, they achieve this by means of allusions to a core of knowledge which is presupposed in the audience. Such allusions tend to evoke a mood or express a strong emotion, which is characteristic of lyrical poetry. Furthermore, these texts generally have the formal characteristics of lyrical poetry, such as limited length and (in Pashto) complex rhyme schemes (see Darmesteter, I, pp. cxciv-cci, II, pp. 1-83;

MacKenzie). The nature of these compositions implies that they tend to lose their popularity when the allusions are no longer understood. Recorded texts rarely go back further than a century before the time they were committed to writing. In some cultures (e.g., among the Kurds of Iraq; Allison, forthcoming) war songs are regarded as a separate category.

Socialthemes. Popular songs and poems with a social content are among the most ephemeral, and therefore least documented, forms of folk poetry. In pre-modern Iranian culture there were the satirical songs of buffoons (*masḵara-bāzī*, see Cejpek, pp. 687-88). James Darmesteter (p. 206) published a Pashto song celebrating the opening of a railway. Kurds often describe "political songs" (*stranēd sīāsī*, see Allison, forthcoming) as a separate genre. Recent upheavals in Tajikistan are known to have given rise to new songs and poems about social questions (Rahmoni). However, very few collections of such texts seem to have been preserved.

Love themes. This is probably the most productive of all themes in lyrical folk poetry, and love themes can be found in many genres (on lyrical love songs whose topics derive from the epic tradition, see Allison, forthcoming). Love is a central theme in the folk poetry of Iranophone peoples, and the variety of popular compositions about love is so great that no representative survey can be given. The love referred to in such texts may be licit or illicit, happy or tragic, portrayed as real or obviously imagined. Popular love poetry may reflect tensions between personal inclination and the demands of society, or illustrate aspects of the life and culture of a community in other ways.

Religious themes. Lyrical religious folk poetry includes such forms as popular songs for religious festivals (e.g., see Wakīlīān), lyrical poems about the Prophet, poems using mystical imagery, prayers in verse form, and meditations on such themes as the need to trust in God and the transitory nature of life (see, e.g., Darmesteter, II, pp. 90-107; van den Berg, pp. 428 f.). A Christian lyrical text in Kurdishissaid to have been composed by an Archbishop but has now become part of the popular tradition of the local Christian population (see Kreyenbroek, 1995b).

Sadness and nostalgia. The Kurds of Northern Iraq regard songs dealing with grief and nostalgia as a separate folk genre (*stranēd ḡerībīyē*, see Allison, 1996, p. 37). These themes play an important role in the folk literature of most Iranophone cultures (Pashto, see Grima, p. 148; Baluchi, see Dames, pp. 105-6; Tajik, see Cejpek, p. 698, Rahmoni; Badaḵšānī Ismaʿili poetry, see van den Berg,

pp. 179 f.). Songs of this type, which may include elegies for the dead, often form part of the repertoire of (semi-)professional singers. Laments and poems to mournthe recently dead, on the other hand, are in some cultures performed mainly by women and may to some extent be extemporized (on the Kurdish *šīn* see Allison, 1996, pp. 42-44; Allison, forthcoming; for Pashto, see Darmesteter, II, pp. 221-26; on the Tajiki *marṯīa,* see Rahmoni).

Various. Other forms of folk poetry include songs for particular occasions, such as weddings (on the Pashto *bābu-lāla,* seeMacKenzie, pp. 325-26; on Tajik wedding songs see Rahmoni), or harvests (see e.g. Rahmoni). Other specific genres include lullabies (generally, see Cejpek, pp. 695-96; Pashto, see Darmesteter, II, pp. 217-20), children's songs (for Baluchi see Dames, p. 163), and riddles in verse form(for Baluchi see Dames, p. xxix).

FORMAL CHARACHERISTICS

Melody. In the case of texts which are sung, or recited in a singing voice, melody may play a significant role in determining the formal coherence of a text (on the role of music in general, see Yarshater; for Middle Persian poetry, Shaked; for Baluchi, Dames, p. xxx; for Kurdish, Soane, pp. 163 f.). In some cases, such as Kurdish folk poetry, a detailed study of the role of melody is urgently needed for a better understanding of folk poetics.

Length. Narrative poetry is generally longer than lyrical texts. In narrative and some forms of lyrical poetry the requirements of form do not determine the exact length of a composition. Some types of lyrical poetry, on the other hand, are characterized by their number of lines (e.g., quatrains of different types [*robāʿī*, *do-baytī*, *fahlavīyāt*, *tarāna*]see Cejpek, pp. 694-95; Mokrī; van den Berg, pp. 142 f.; and Rahmoni). The Pashto *landəy* (*misrəy*, *tapa*) consists of a single distich (MacKenzie, pp. 322 f.). In performance, a number of short texts may be recited together (Rahmoni; van den Berg, p. 167).

Rhyme. In many types of folk poetry rhyme is a important factor. Long narrative texts usually have simple rhyme schemes, e.g., that of the *maṯnawī* (aa, bb, cc, etc.; so does the Pashto *qeṣṣa*), or end-rhyme (ba, ca, da, ea, etc.). The latter may persist throughout the poem, or mark stanzas or "rhyme sequences" (for Kurdish poetry see Mann, 1909, pp. xxxvi f; Chyet, pp. 138 f.). In Baluchi epic poetry rhyme is apparently less significant than stress metre and number of syllables (see Elfenbein, forthcoming).

Shorter compositions may have the rhyme scheme associated with the classical *ḡazal* and *qaṣīda* (aa, ba, ca, etc.). This is found in compositions originally deriving from classical Persian poetry (van den Berg, pp. 47, 249 ff.; Rahmoni), but also in songs and poems of non-classical origin (see, e.g., van den Berg, p. 185; on the Pashto *robāʿī* see MacKenzie, p. 323; on the various rhyme schemes of quatrains in folk poetry see Cejpek, pp. 694-95). More complex rhyme schemes are found where a refrain helps to mark the end of a stanza (see Rypka, p. 96; van den Berg, pp. 192 f.; on the permutations of this form in Pashto folk poetry see MacKenzie, pp. 320 f.).

Metre. Texts which can be defined as folk poetry but derive from or are strongly influenced by classical Persian poetry tend to follow the Perso-Arabic scheme of quantitative metres (see ʿARŪŻ; Rypka, pp. 92-93). Most other texts have different metrical patterns, however, and the absence of an *ʿarūż*-metre is sometimes held to be a distinguishing characteristic of folk poetry (see, e.g., MacKenzie, pp. 319-20; cf. Mann, 1909, p. xxxii; Soane, p. 160). Other forms of quantitative metre (fixed combinations of short and long syllables) may play a role in such works (for Baluchi, see Dames, pp. xxix-xxxiv; for Badaḵšānī poetry, see van den Berg, p. 171). In other cases Iranophone folk poetry may have a stress or syllabic metre, or a combination of both (on stress metre in Kurdish, see Soane, pp. 163-66; on the combined role of syllables and stress in Baluchi prosody, see Elfenbein, forthcoming). Strict syllabic metres are found in Baluchi (Elfenbein, forthcoming) and Pashto (MacKenzie) folk poetry and in some texts from eastern parts of Kurdistan (see Mokrī; on the Ahl-e Ḥaqq *kalām*s, see Ṣafīzāda, p. 29). No definitive conclusions have been reached regarding the prosody of most Kurdish folk poetry (see Mann, 1909, pp. xxxii f.; Soane, pp. 163-70; Nikitine, 1947; idem, 1956, pp. 296-71; Chyet, pp. 132-44). It seems clear that rhyme is one of the main factors to determine the form of much of this poetry, and the number of syllables probably plays a role also (on the possible importance of melody in some of these works cf. above).

FOLK POETRY AND MODERNITY

Live performance—whether by professional minstrels or nursing mothers, in communal gatherings or at home—has traditionally been the life blood of most of the poetic traditions described here. However, in many cases the natural milieu of such performances was the traditional life of small communities (see, e.g., Kreyenbroek, 1996; Jānmahmad, p. 62), which may now have been eroded by migrations to urban centres, or simply by the advent of television in a village. On the other hand, performance traditions are

sometimes adapted to urban culture and cassette tapes have made folk poetry accessible to those who no longer attend village gatherings. In recent decades Kurdish and Pashto popular poetry has reached large audiences in this way, and played a significant part in political and social events (Grima, p. 155; Kreyenbroek, 1992, p. 75). Moreover, in many cases those who have become urbanized have rediscovered the popular poetry of their people, claimed it as their cultural or indeed national heritage (for Tajikistan see Cejpek, Bečka, Hitchins, Rahmoni; for Kurds Kreyenbroek, 1992), and published it in written form (Allison, 1996, pp. 31-2). Thus, while some of the traditions described here may not survive unaltered, the increased status of some folk poetry may cause it to live on as part of the polite literature of future generations.

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